

The ups and downs of federal funding for stem cell research

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They can't fund stem cell research...

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For now. In the "He loves me; He loves me not" game of stem cell research funding, the current petal removed by the U.S. Court of Appeals puts funding for human embryonic stem cell research back within the purview of the NIH. Today the court put a hold on Judge Royce Lamberth's ruling that effectively halted NIH funding of human embryonic stem cell research. Bloomberg wrote:

“The purpose of this administrative stay is to give the court sufficient opportunity to consider the merits of the emergency motion for stay and should not be construed in any way as a ruling on the merits of that motion,” the appeals court wrote in its decision. So far, the timeline of NIH funding of human embryonic stem cell research looks like this:

2001: Then-president George Bush limits federal funding for embryonic stem cell research to a handful of existing stem cell lines.

2004: Californians support proposition 71, creating the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine to administer \$3 billion in bonds to fund stem cell research (adult and embryonic) in California.

2009: President Obama lifted the Bush-era restrictions, directing the NIH to create guidelines for approving new embryonic stem cell lines into the pool of those that can be included in federally funded research.

August 23, 2010: Judge Royce Lamberth ruled federal funding of human embryonic stem cell research impermissible under current laws. He put an immediate injunction on all federal funding for such research. Much confusion and uncertainty amongst stem cell scientists ensued, as documented by CIRM grantee at UC Davis Paul Knoepfler on his blog.

August 31, 2010: The U.S. Government appealed the ruling, citing irreparable harm to researchers, taxpayers and scientific progress.

September 7, 2010: Judge Lamberth refused the federal government's request to stay the order.

September 9, 2010: The U.S. Court of Appeals put a hold on Judge Lamberth's ruling, allowing the NIH to continue funding research involving human embryonic stem cells.

The latest ruling is good news, but there are still many petals to remove before we know whether the NIH can fund, or fund not. For those scientists who have NIH funding for human embryonic stem cell research or who have grants under review, they still live with uncertainty over whether they'll be able to complete those projects (or find cures for those diseases they hope to treat).

Throughout this, CIRM continues to fund stem cell research (embryonic and adult) in California, accelerating the pace to new cures, creating jobs, and building California's biotechnology leadership. But as CIRM grantees told us in a survey, they need NIH funds in addition to CIRM. In the survey, 76% of CIRM grantees who have NIH funding said the funding freeze would impact their ability to carry out research with adult, cancer, or iPS stem cells. Only 5% of grantees -- with or without NIH funding -- said the ruling would make no difference to their overall research strategy.

This table provides links to all CIRM-funded grants involving human embryonic stem cells.

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Tags: Knoepfler, NIH